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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the rationale for the development of an elementary teacher training program designed to prepare students to teach in rural areas. The Province of British Columbia (Canada) is a vast geographic region populated by only two and a quarter million people. Most reside in rural communities ranging in population from a few hundred to several thousand. The schools in these small communities are the focal point of the teacher training program. At present most teacher training programs prepare students for teaching positions in urban centers and large rural communities. The University of Victoria, British Columbia, structured a training program to develop teachers specifically for these small communities. This program incorporates 2 years of univesity study with two years of "first hand" experience of teaching and living in an isolated settlement. Students complete several community, school, and classroom projects dealing with the unique environment of a small rural settlement. To be awarded a Bachelor of Education degree, the students complete a fifth year of study at the main campus of the University. The rural elementary teacher training program more adequately prepares students for careers in rural schools and sensitizes them to the professional life of a rural teacher. Graduates of this program embark on their professional careers in rural communities with greater confidence. A chart outlining the time frame of the program is given. This paper contains 16 references. (ALL)

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A NEW CANADIAN TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME FOR RURAL TEACHERS

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A New Canadian Teacher Education Programme

For Rural Teachers

> If all the world's a stage, British Columbia is one of its most dramatic sets. It is an ice-capped, forest floored, mineral rich, water blessed mountain domain. It is a land of abundance, opportunity and magnificence. Untamed, restless and bold, the province is one of the last great frontiers in North America (McDonald, 1966, p. 5)

Introduction

The Province of British Columbia is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful regions of the world. Almost everyone resides within the sight of mountains which divide the Province into regions with unique characteristics and life styles. The major river systems, the Liard, Peace, Fraser and Columbia, at the beginning of the century, provided pioneers with water highways into the northern and interior regions of the Province. Today these rivers produce hydro-electricity, serve as routes for railways, roads, oil pipelines, provide water for irrigation projects and offer British Columbians excellent facilities for water sports. These mountains and rivers, however, have created barriers to communication, have resulted in this region being somewhat removed from the rest of the country and have tended to make people somewhat insular in their perceptions.

British Columbia occupies 366,255 square miles of land, an area equal in size to the United Kingdom, France and 41,000 square miles of Spain put together. The

weather, as one might expect, is as varied as the terrain. According to McDonald (1966):

> There may be as many types of weather in any one day as over most of Europe on the same day. At the same hour there can be fog at Prince Rupert, snow at Fort Nelson, rain at Vancouver, dry heat at Williams Lake and balmy sunshine at Victoria (p. 6).

Perhaps, what comes as the biggest surprise to the foreign visitor is that only two and a quarter million people live in this vast geographic region.

The Public Education System of British Columbia

The British North America Act, Section 93, delegated responsibility for education to the province. Though every Canadian province has a unique public school system, the provincial systems of education have many commonalities. After completing a comprehensive review of the provincial public education systems, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (1976) reported that:

> Unlike more other comparable industrialized countries, Canada has neither produced a politically motivated educational reform, rooted in a conception of the country's future, nor has it blocked such reforms, as it has happened in a number of European countries. Instead, Canada has trodden out its own path, with an array of exceptionally active programmes for vast quantitative expansion and significant qualitative change of the education system that are, however, devised from no explicitly stated, overall national conceptions the country's interests (pp. 20-21).

Similar to other provinces of Canada, British Columbia's public education system has experienced "alternating or

conflicting cycles of 'progressivism' and 'traditionalism'" (Tomkins, 1977, p. 1). As an illustration of one of the progressive cycles, individualized instruction and child-centred curricula became the focus of educational activity in the late sixties. The 1968 Hall-Dennis Report, entitled Living and Learning, served as a platform for scholars, parents and teachers who wanted the public education system to become more personalized.

As the economic climate changed, both parents and politicians viewed public school systems more critically. The present demands for greater accountability began in the late seventies with the emergence of the 'back-to-basics' movement. This cycle of traditionalism was founded on the fact that parents, as Wilson (1971) notes, associated "a formal, ordered, structured mode of teaching with the 'basics' and recoiled at the supposed permissiveness of the public schools" (p. 34). The cycles of change which pass through the Canadian education system, whether they are progressive or traditional in nature, are complex, diverse and persistent. Therefore, even in the present period which is characterized by diminishing resources, declining enrolments and high inflation, a variety of services are demanded from schools ranging from a return to the '3R's' to family life education (Kratzmann, Byrne and Worth, 1980).

The public education system of British Columbia for administrative purposes is divided into 75 school districts. Each district is managed by a school board consisting of a superintendent and a number of school trustees. The primary responsibility of a board is to ensure that government legislation, policies and guidelines are being applied in the school district. Approximately, two thirds of these districts serve rural communities which may vary in size from large centres with populations of thousands to small settlements with a few hundred people.

Throughout the northern, interior, coastal and foothills areas of the province are scattered many small elementary, junior-secondary and senior high schools. Often children travel for hours in all kinds of weather to attend these institutions. Planning inter-school activities is difficult under these circumstances. Similarly, attendance at a play, ballet or opera is a rare event for most children. Due to the small size of rural schools most children are educated in multigrade classes which generate some rather unique problems for teachers.

Importance of Rural Schools

The future economic growth and development of British Columbia will be dependent, to a significant extent, on the natural wealth of the region. If existing natural resources are to be 'harvested', settlements in northern, coastal, central and foothills areas must be sustained and if

possible grow in size. For this to occur, families must be encouraged to reside in the settlements.

Initially, the father of a family may move to a community seeking employment. Once he has secured a job, then he will often arrange for his family to join him. One important factor in making this decision is whether there is a 'good' school in the community. Parents are well aware that the education their children receive in elementary school influences their performance in academic activities in later years.

The small rural school makes an important contribution to the life of a rural community. In addition to providing children with a basic elementary education, the local school serves as a town hall for discussing community affairs and offers adults a centre for social events. Usually, settlements which have no school do not survive or remain small and so make minimal contribution to the development of an area.

The quality and quantity of learning experiences offered by small schools are directly related to the effectiveness of the teachers staffing them. If the teachers are energetic, enthusiastic and relate well to the community the school is a dynamic place of learning. Alternatively, schools staffed by teachers who are jaded, disenchanted and alienated from the communities they serve tend to be characterized by conflict, poor student perform-

ance and an unhealthy climate. Often school-community relations leave much to be desired.

In a rural setting, parents have few alternatives available to them if the local school is inadequate. To drive a child to a school in another community can be extremely demanding when the total return journey is nearly 200 miles. Most parents are naturally reluctant to billet their children with friends or relatives in another community. Hence parents have to accept the situation, assuming there will be some improvement in the short-run or they move to another community.

Preparing Teachers for Rural Schools

Two decades ago, superintendents and trustees were happy if by the first week of the school year, they had a 'warm body' in every classroom in the school district. A high teacher turnover was an accepted fact of life. This situation has drastically changed over the past few years, though there are indications that rural teachers may once again become mobile in the near future.

Due to a declining student population, many urban school districts often have more teachers under contract than they need to staff schools. Simultaneously, the provincial government has limited financial support for education. As a consequence of these two forces, urban school districts have tended to hire very few teachers over the past five years. Therefore, many students graduating

from teacher preparation programmes have been commencing their professional careers in rural schools. Superintendents recognize that a 'buyers market' exists and so selects teachers for positions rather than accept whoever may be available. Recently, a shortage of specialist teachers has arisen in rural and northern areas of the province. Many educators perceive there will be a shortage of rural teachers at levels of the public education system. Once again, superintendents may be searching for 'warm bodies' to staff schools.

Present training programmes tend to focus on preparing students for teaching positions in urban centres and large rural communities. Therefore, many new teachers are inadequately prepared for the contingencies which they will encounter in the first years of their careers as rural teachers. At the University of Victoria, British Columbia, a special and rather unique preparation programme has been proposed by Cross (1982) and associates for students interested in teaching in rural communities. Prior to coordinating the development of this innovative programme, Cross (1980, 1981a, 1981b) completed an investigation on the skills and characteristics of rural teachers and visited teacher training institutions in Australia and New Zealand which offered special programmes for rural teachers.

The proposed preparation programme is structured so students spend the first two years of their professional preparation at the main campus of the University. This period on campus allows the students to adjust to university life, to assess whether they really want to be teachers, to indicate whether they have an aptitude for academic study and to discuss career aspirations with faculty members or student advisers. The third and fourth years of the programme are completed in small rural or northern communities. Students are provided with numerous opportunities to experience 'first hand' the realities of teaching and living in an isolated settlement.

All students are expected to complete an extended early field experience while residing in the rural communities. During these periods of immersion in rural life, the students complete a community assessment, design and produce a community oriented event, undertake a study of school-community interaction, design and produce a school event, complete an indepth analysis of a rural classroom, and produce, as well as teach, a unit of work specifically designed for a rural class. Also, as part of their practica, students are required to prepare a professional journal describing their in-school and out-of-school experiences.

The sponsor teachers, with the cooperation of faculty advisers, will be expected to assist students to become

adjusted to the unique teaching environment of a small rural school. Career counselling will be provided by both field practitioner and university adviser upon request. Regular academic and professional courses offered students prior to them commencing, would focus on issues of primary importance to rural teachers, students and parents.

To be awarded a Bachelor of Education degree, the students will be required to complete a fifth year of study at the main campus of the University. The academic and professional courses taken during this year will be designed to offer students opportunities for professional enrichment. While on campus, the students will be encouraged to meet with faculty members to discuss issues which arose while teaching in rural schools.

Concluding Comments

Very few teacher training programmes in Canada, as well as throughout the world, adequately prepare students for professional careers in rural schools. Consequently, many new graduates upon commencing their duties in rural schools experience substantive 'cultural shock' and 'professional realism'. Those individuals who do not adjust quickly to the new socio-cultural milieu in which they find themselves become lonely, frustrated, anxious and depressed. Under these circumstances, they endeavour to obtain teaching positions in larger communities.

When the supply of teachers is greater than the demand, securing a new teaching appointment is often difficult. Those teachers, dissatisfied with teaching in a rural school, who are unsuccessful in finding a professional position can either endeavour to secure employment outside the professional or remain in their present positions. If circumstances result in these teachers choosing the latter option, the learning experiences which they offer rural children may be less than satisfactory. A circumstance of this kind is to be avoided, if possible, at all costs.

The rural elementary teacher training programme discussed in this report more adequately prepares students for careers in rural schools and of equal importance, sensitizes them to the professional life of a rural teacher. Whether this teaching immersion experience will satisfy specific learning objectives is unknown. One fact is certain, however, the students who successfully complete such a programme will embark on their professional careers in rural communities with much greater confidence.

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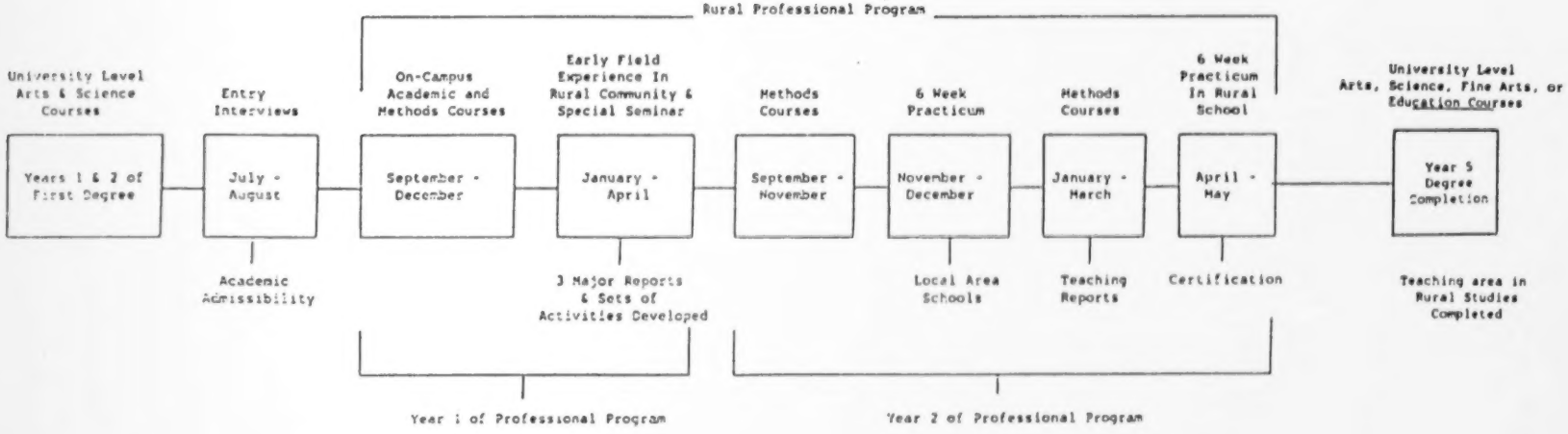
Rural Professional Program
University Level Arts & Science Courses
Entry Interviews
On-Campus Academic and Methods Courses
Early Field Experience In Rural Community & Special Seminar
Methods Courses
6 Week Practicum
Methods Courses
6 Week Practicum In Rural School
University Level Arts, Science, Fine Arts, or Education Courses
Years 1 & 2 of First Degree
July - August
September - December
January - April
September - November
November - December
January - March
April - May
Year 5 Degree Completion
Academic Admissibility
3 Major Reports & Sets of Activities Developed
Local Area Schools
Teaching Reports
Certification
Teaching area in Rural Studies Completed
Year 1 of Professional Program
Year 2 of Professional Program

Figure 1: The Proposed Rural Elementary Teacher Preparation Programme

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